

A Transmasculine Experience of a Career in Outdoor Recreation

SANDY HEATH & LAUREN DUFFY

SUMMARY

The outdoor recreation industry is heavily influenced by a dominant, heteronormative culture—a culture that defines the experience not only for the participants but also the people working within the industry (Warren 2015; Holland, Powell, Thomsen, and Monz 2018). Those interested in advancing a career as a professional in the outdoor recreation industry, particularly related to outdoor leadership and adventure guiding, are often required to engage in a variety of unique living situations, arrangements, and contexts. This may include, for example, moving to rural and remote communities that sit adjacent to wildlands where many outdoor recreation organizations operate their programs. It may also require extended overnight trips with shared housing and rooming arrangements that require a level of intimacy with people they work with that is uncommon to most employment settings. Unique to this field, then, is how entangled personal identities are in the professional settings where one works with colleagues and serves their participants, a phenomenon that creates distinctive challenges to individuals who have non-dominant identities. This case study follows the career of a transmasculine outdoor recreation professional, Zach, as their career in the outdoor industry traverses multiple sectors (ski patrol to wilderness therapy) and geographic locations in North America (New Mexico to Alaska). Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with Zach, along with a photo elicitation exercise where he/they shared photographs that communicated a deeper meaning of his/their lived experience. In the sections below, you will learn about the experiences that Zach had through his/their career within the outdoor recreation industry and how his/their queer identity shaped his/their professional and personal experience in these spaces.

THE VALUE AND INTEREST OF THE CASE STUDY

This case study asks the reader to consider how the pervasiveness of dominant culture affects future professionals in the outdoor recreation industry. Wild settings do not inherently produce social cues in the absence of people (Gandy 2012), leading to some arguing that these natural spaces act as a “great equalizer” of social norms. However, this notion has been found to be a myth, especially in light of historical contexts of these spaces that create meaning for certain groups of individuals (e.g., Theriault and Mowatt 2020). Further, though, is the reality that experiences in wilderness are often with people, especially through organized program settings facilitated through outdoor education, adventure, and wilderness therapy organizations. Through a critical analysis of Zach’s lived experience as a Two Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, Plus other non-conforming identities (LGBTQ2SIA+ or 2LGBTQIA+) outdoor recreation professional, implications for outdoor industry organizations and managers are considered, including how to address organizational culture and social practices, and ensure authenticity in implementing equity practices within the organization.

BACKGROUND

Outdoor professionals tend to spend large portions of their life working in remote locations with people they hardly know. —Zach

Outdoor leadership, outdoor education, wilderness therapy, adventure guiding, and other amalgamations of the field reflect a unique, specialized vocational track where outdoor professionals often travel as a “pod” in remote,

Sandy Heath (they/she/he) worked as a (dis)ability rights advocate and now is teaching and building a research program at Northern Arizona University and the Institute for Human Development.

Lauren Duffy (she/her) is an associate professor in the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management at Clemson University. Her research program is grounded within critical leisure and tourism studies.

natural environments for a day or multiple days at a time to facilitate learning experiences as part of a program or course. The focus of these programs can vary greatly and serve different populations; however, what may be seen as a common thread across these is the use of the natural outdoor environment as a medium for individual or group growth and development (Harrison et al. 2022). The Society of Outdoor Recreation Professionals describes the link across outdoor recreation programming as “activities undertaken for leisure, mental and physical health, spirituality, or other reasons that take place outdoors and are typically dependent on a nature-based environment.”

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Organizations, such as two of the largest mainstays in the industry, Outward Bound and the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), have on staff or contract out the program to outdoor professionals who can meet the needs of the group. Specifically, these outdoor professionals must have a wide range of skills, from “hard”, technical competencies (e.g., kayak rescue, tying of knots for rock climbing), to “soft” skills that include decision-making, interpersonal management, and group management in order to effectively lead groups safely to their desired goals (Martin, Breunig, Wagstaff, and Goldenberg 2017). To this end, these outdoor leaders must be able to plan and implement expedition programs. This type of program planning includes logistical safety as well as positive group dynamics.

These pods may vary in group characteristics and in how well the individuals know each other. While the goals of a program may shape a common motivation for participation, often the range of demographics and psychographics across the individual participants can be broad (e.g., age, gender, religion, interests, skill level). Further, familiarity can range from members who know each other very well with established relationships, such as family members or close friends, to the opposite end of the familiarity spectrum, where individuals are strangers to each other at first meeting, but then actively move through the group development phases as the newly formed pod (Cashel 1994).

Added to the group development process among the participants is the role and placement of the group leader among these emerging dynamics. The outdoor professional plays a central role not only in the phases of group development, but also with regard to participant goal attainment (Martin et al. 2017). It is also worth noting that such traveling pods are also found in other subsets of outdoor professions with jobs that require colleagues to travel remotely together for extended periods of time, such as trail maintenance and wildland firefighting.

What is really important within these settings is the social structures and group norms that are formed in these spaces. Individuals come to understand what is acceptable and what is not. Historically, queer expression has not been, and still is not, acceptable in these spaces (Springate 2016; Theriault 2017; Argus 2018). Professionals who identify as LGBTQIA+ navigate these social environments using techniques that range from concealment to assimilation. Concealing one’s identity, while it should be respected as a personal choice, signals that a social environment may not be a safe or comfortable space for queer expression. Assimilating to a dominant culture as a technique to maneuver in a social environment is the repression of queer expression.

METHODS

A critical narrative approach was used to learn about the experiences of Zach, an LGBTQIA+ outdoor recreation professional (Polkinghorne 2007; Merriam and Grenier 2019). This approach was used because of its ability to critique dominant systems in society that are often taken for fact. This project is a case study of one individual’s experiences and is not expected to produce generalizable results.

It was also imperative to protect Zach’s anonymity. “Zach” is a pseudonym used while he/they shared personal stories that could potentially impact his/their career and social life (Herrick and Duncan 2018) gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, etc.. Zach’s experiences were collected using informal interviewing, a relatively new method used to collect qualitative data in the social sciences (Kvale 2011; Creswell and Poth 2018). Two interviews were conducted. In this case study, we gave Zach a general guiding question to get the conversation started, then opened the interview structure to allow and encourage Zach to lead in determining the duration and direction of the interview. In



An image provided courtesy of Zach as part of the photo elicitation portion of the interview. This is one example of a photo that Zach provided to convey his experiences as a transmasculine person working in outdoor recreation. The photos in themselves were not analyzed as primary data but rather used to elicit conversation during the interview process. During Zach's interview, he spoke about what this photo represented metaphorically for him: that nature accepted him even when the social environment was hostile.

the second interview, Zach was asked to bring photographs that held meaning for him/they and his/their career in outdoor recreation. Zach responded by delving deep into his/their experiences beyond what we could have anticipated through preprepared questions. This technique gave the study a rich data source to pull from.

Biographical analysis (Creswell and Poth 2018; Durdella 2019) was used to read both interview transcripts on the first pass. This analysis style was used to understand Zach's experiences in the context of his overall narrative. Secondary data were then reviewed to understand Zach's experiences within the context of broader society to include geographic location, current events, and the current political climate for the advancement of LGBTQIA+ civil rights in North America. While biographical analysis was used, the analysis was positioned within the critical narrative approach to keep the meaning of the narratives whole while maintaining the positionality of critiquing society (Riessman 2008). Using abductive analysis (Kvale 2011; Brinkmann 2013), quotes were then pulled during additional readings of the transcripts to include in the results. This extra layer of analysis, beyond the first rounds of biographical analysis, offered pragmatic insights into data that were initially diffuse.

LIMITATIONS

The initial research question focused on the intersectional experiences of Zach working as an outdoor recreation professional while affirming his/their gender as a transmasculine person. During the analysis it was clear that themes involving community were central to this case. Zach spoke of the way community (both within an organization and within the broader location) impacted his/their working experience. The implications of this project were about intentional community building and the challenges and opportunities we should consider for outdoor professionals settling into sometimes remote communities. This project offers a snapshot of one person on this topic. This project was only a beginning. Future research is needed to understand more broadly the experiences of transmasculine outdoor recreation professionals. In addition, more participant narratives would offer a more robust variety of

experiences in the career field of outdoor recreation professions. Conducting interviews using a teleconference method, which we employed, precludes the physical experience of the researcher and participant meeting, which can be important. Finally, as set forth by our analysis design, we analyzed Zach's story as a whole but were limited by how much we could learn about him/they given the interview format and duration.

WORKING IN THE OUTDOORS

Inclusion in outdoor recreation cannot be understood without also discussing the historical context involved. The challenges that outdoor organizations face regarding inclusivity are rooted in histories. These histories vary depending on location and time, but also with respect to the perspective from which the narrative is told.

In this case study, Zach gave us an overview of his/their history roughly from 2005 to 2021. He/they described his/their experience as a lesbian working in the ski patrol profession, then later as a fully affirmed transmasculine person working as a counselor in a wilderness therapy program. Zach described his/their awareness of gender identity and sexual identity in the context of working as an outdoor recreation professional. One key point that Zach brought to the forefront is the social isolation that can occur when working in rural and remote locations.

Zach's social environment, both working in the field and living in rural communities, gave signals that his/their innate gender and sexuality were false and morally wrong. These signals created confusion and fear as Zach navigated social environments while experiencing the normal human development patterns of puberty and young adulthood.

It is no secret that LGBTQIA+ identities have historically been pathologized in dominant culture (Castro-Peraza 2019), an issue that is rooted in political and religious beliefs. Zach's story demonstrates how ideologies in broader society that pathologize or treat queer identity as abnormal can impact a person's experience working in outdoor recreation, especially in the context of working as a leader or guide.

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Zach spoke about his/their experience moving to a community for an outdoor employment opportunity—a community environment where he did not expect intolerance:

I stayed at a hostel at the 1st [First] Presbyterian [Church] when I first got there. I couldn't afford housing, so I stayed there but it was very uncomfortable. It was a very rough couple of years. It's a very conservative town. The entire island voted for Trump if that gives you any idea of the flavor of the town.¹ I get talked about on some of the community Facebook pages. I do not feel safe.

Zach went on to give examples of the social interactions he/they faced living on a small remote island to maintain employment in his/their career field. Transgender people are frequently subjected to aggressive and violent acts of hate (Wirtz, Poteat, Malik, and Glass 2020), which range from hate speech to assault and homicide (Lee 2017). Often there is a blatant disregard for trans bodies, where aggressors feel far too comfortable negatively commenting on or violating them (Rosario, Schrimshaw, and Hunter 2012; Okpodi and Okhakhu 2016; Lee 2017; Wirtz, Poteat, Malik, and Glass 2020). A. L., Poteat, T. C., Malik, M., & Glass, N. (2020). According to the Human Rights Campaign, in 2021 fifty fatalities of transgender, gender non-conforming, or non-binary individuals were recorded as a result of violence towards them.

[There's one guy I watch out for in the community groups online]. For the past five years he's had a poster in his front yard that says Black Rifles Matter. So yeah, I mean it's dangerous, but I have a rainbow flag in my window anyway.

Zach brought up a common association seeing the Black Rifles Matter sign, among many other similar hate symbols he sees in the community. Black Rifles Matter is a rhetorical counter to the Black Lives Matter movement that started in

2013 as a protest against police brutality towards Black Americans; the movement gained worldwide momentum after the murder of George Floyd in 2020 (Barbot 2020). Though often trivialized in the form of a social media meme, this sign is communicating two clear messages: that the sign owner's beliefs are grounded in white supremacy, and more broadly, that the local environment is generally not safe for non-dominant identities. Language that threatens violence can be understood as a form of real violence (Warren, Mullen, and McEwan 2014). In this regard, violence should be understood as both physical or mental acts, including hate speech, that create fear in ways that reinforce categorical differences with the purpose of damaging, humiliating or otherwise destroying a person (Young 1990; also see Bufacchi 2007). Zach spoke of his/their experience making a place for himself/theirselves in this town despite the looming symbols.

I worked a second job at the burger joint. The owner was awesome. He was very accepting. I wanted to start an LGBTQ+ group and so we did that summer. We held the town's first ever Equality March. We walked down Main Street and had posters. About thirty people attended. We put the event on Facebook Live and a news article journalist ended up taking pictures of us and writing about it.

Zach was able to find and create a safe place for himself/theirselves on the island where he/they was actively harassed, intimidated, and discriminated against. However, this process took an emotional toll. Negotiating these social environments was work that Zach's more dominant colleagues at the outdoor organization did not have to prioritize. These negotiations seemed to detract from his/their quality of life, overall happiness, and fulfillment. Whether discussed in practice or as research, we often miss the true impact that exposure to these types of environments has on equity: they produce a butterfly effect of inequality in which seemingly small and distant acts of discrimination eventually reverberate throughout society.

Finally, Zach's career path led him/they to wilderness therapy, a form of outdoor programming that is associated with behavioral healthcare (Rutko and Gillespie 2013). In this regard, wilderness therapy has a very distinct therapeutic focus with specific goals that are intended to help address healthcare treatment objectives (e.g., behavior, depression, anxiety, low self-confidence). In these settings, the outdoor leaders are critical to ensuring the physical and mental safety and well-being of participants and are often central to the programming experience. As individuals, the outdoor leaders are creating important relationships with the participants that are often necessary for them to achieve their goals.

Zach shared during his/their interview a very poignant example of workforce discrimination that he/they experienced while preparing for an extended time working in the field. He/they describes how a supervisor advised him/they to conceal his/their identity as a trans person. Asking a person to conceal their queer identity in general or when working with youth—even if a well-intentioned attempt to protect the person's safety—gives reference to the historical context of LGBTQIA+ people being perceived as indecent or perverse. Zach had to contend with the likelihood of losing his/their job due to his/their personal identity. As an outdoor professional, Zach knew that as he/they developed relationships with program participants, he/they would find himself/theirselves at an inflection point of discussing his/their own personal identity. After all, he/they recognized what an important role he/they plays in the wilderness therapy programs. Participants in wilderness therapy programs report that part of the success of these programs stems from the responsiveness of the instructors: providing a relational approach (Russell 2000; Russell and Phillips-Miller 2002).

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So, I went into the field and I mean within two (2) hours of my forty-five (45) day shift, the participants started talking about Caitlyn Jenner. I was like huh okay here we are and I can't say anything. This is going to be rough. Finally, one of the participants just asked me flat out and I was not going to lie. The participant who asked had lesbian parents. Their parents had been out, and they grew up in the queer community. After that, news spread to the whole camp by the next day. I didn't know what was going to happen. I figured something was gonna happen.

Zach shared the outcome of this interaction. The organization prioritized and orchestrated an expensive medical evacuation to remove Zach from the field. Zach's employment was suspended, which had a profound impact on his/their career for the next several months. The organization made evident their biases and priorities by allocating resources to cover up Zach's queer identity.

THE PATH FORWARD

It is imperative that we interrogate the history of outdoor recreation to include the *organizations* that facilitate outdoor recreation, the *environments* where outdoor recreation takes place, and the *sentiment* of what it means to be an outdoor professional. There are many ideas on how to counter erasure in the outdoors; however, two methods rise to the forefront: (1) promoting venues for authentic storytelling, and (2) questioning history or the stories we think we know.

Hearing stories like Zach's is important to teasing out authentic experiences that may counter the dominant narrative. In this regard, hearing these stories first-hand and how certain events were felt and experienced may help to create solidarity and allyship with other outdoor professionals. Additionally, it adds to the existing discourse on the importance of representation within the field (Eck 2021). Moreover, it is important to question if we are making future decisions based on stories we accept as true without question. For instance, reframing conversations about idols, legacies, and memorials (by questioning the origins and ideologies behind these symbols) will surface harmful assumptions that guide decision-making in outdoor recreation. This can start by choosing language wisely through a reclamation process that targets industry narratives and program curricula, and renaming or reclaiming the names of outdoor spaces. It can also work to rediscover the histories that have been buried and erased, like the existence of LGBTQIA+ people themselves (Springate 2016; Berbary and Guzman 2018).

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It is critical that we tell a more complete history of outdoor recreation (see Brown et al. 2023). Currently, many outdoor organizations remain complicit in prioritizing the colonial values of triumph and athletic achievement instead of working to understand the complicated history of how outdoor recreation and public land acquisition has contributed to the marginalization of people throughout history. Knowing this history will open the window to more informed and inclusive decision-making practices.

IMPLICATIONS FOR OUTDOOR INDUSTRY ORGANIZATIONS AND MANAGERS

The LGBTQIA+ person's success or failure to assimilate to a heteronormative social environment impacts their access to community and career opportunities in the outdoors and limits the multitude of possibilities for identity expression in this career field (Robinett 2014; Robinson 2016; Mendez and Mendez 2018). Stories of systematic reinforcement of oppression toward LGBTQIA+ people through traditions and practices were evident in this case study. Moments of identity affirmation also arose in Zach's narrative; however, these were not common and were often spoken of as outliers. More research is needed to understand the nuances of what makes an affirming community for LGBTQIA+ people in outdoor professional spaces. In a practical sense, this raises the question of how outdoor organizations can help support non-dominant identities and mitigate instances of exclusion.

CONCLUSIONS

Zach brought to light a poignant point centered on a requirement to assimilate to a single (white-Eurocentric, cis-gendered, able-bodied, heteronormative) story of what it means to be part of the outdoor industry and the outdoor community. This single story, as it relates to outdoor recreation in Zach's experiences, can be traced to a history of government-sponsored racism, sexism, and heterosexism in North America. Dominant heteronormative culture in the outdoor industry is part of a bigger force, ingrained in society at large, that excludes queer identity. Zach speaks to this when he discusses the complicated signals he/they received while living in the rural communities that hosted the organizations he/they worked for. These signals seemed difficult to decode at times because of the entangled historical context. We all have different understandings of history given our education, exposure, or experiences.

Our understanding of parks and tourism today in North America is largely founded on the idea of the 19th-century American frontier movement. The movement that formed the public lands on which much of outdoor recreation is conducted today was one built on the human trafficking of African people and the genocide of many Indigenous Nations that inhabited North America before European immigration. This bigger story is the story of how we arrived at the biases we face today. It is this bigger story that gives us context as to how and why queer erasure is possible today in outdoor recreation organizations, even those that denounce discrimination against LGBTQIA+ people. It is the implicit force inside of us all, of stories we grew up hearing from elders, schools, and government that shaped our world view. Zach weaves this understanding of a bigger story through his/their narrative. In Zach's story, he/they illuminates the discrimination he/they felt from dominant culture in a rural town while speaking about the influence and reach of media, popular culture, and news.

Colonial, acquisitive ideology that originated in the hateful and destructive past is still prevalent in the outdoor industry today, as seen in the widespread use of terms such as “exploring,” “claiming,” or “bagging” a peak or a route.

Looking back over the past century, we see the proliferation of novels, films, and historical texts that have connected problematic stories of the frontier to small towns across America (Turner 1893). These stories are often told in a way that glorifies a partial truth, turning a town into a tourist destination, based on a myth that is problematic at best. Colonial, acquisitive ideology that originated in this hateful and destructive past is still prevalent in the outdoor industry today, as seen in the widespread use of terms such as “exploring,” “claiming,” or “bagging” a peak or a route. Even if we set aside the problematic origins of such ideas, the notion that exploration and measuring one's ability in the outdoors is exclusive to Euro-colonial experience of outdoors is simply incorrect and should be questioned.

In truth, outdoor experiences have been commandeered and appropriated by the white colonial narrative—a narrative that is also inherently anti-LGBTQIA+. Many LGBTQIA+ stories that have been erased by the colonial narrative may describe the values of the outdoors in a different context. Stories of LGBTQIA+ people's bravery and oneness with wild spaces expand our consciousness beyond the telling of a single story told by a racist and heterosexist conqueror (Finney 2014; Vernon 2020).

ENDNOTE

1. Donald Trump was the 45th president of the United States. His administration eliminated protections and opportunities for marginalized populations, including within those within the LGBTQIA+ community (Vesoulis 2020). For more information on the social implications of this administration on marginalized groups see Pulido, Bruno, Faiver-Serna, and Galentine 2019.

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